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ABSTRACT

The dialogic method of teaching, which is based on Paulo Freire's notion of dialogue as the "sealing power" in the writing classroom, encourages critical thinking and interaction, and should take a more prominent place in composition classrooms. According to Lev Vygotsky, knowledge, thought, and learning are social and collaborative acts. Language that includes thought and action is used in writing, and writing communicates the multitude of voices inside each person. By employing dialogic interaction in the classroom (beginning with the students' own understanding and descriptions of daily life experiences) the teacher can help the students to bridge the gap between the abstract intellectual idiom of the classroom and the reality of the outside world. Kenneth Bruffee's concept of collaborative learning (based on Vygotsky) is essential to writing classrooms. There are four different types of dialogic strategies that can be employed in the writing classroom: (1) begin the course by asking the students to reveal their writing experiences, the problems they encounter in writing, and their attitudes towards writing; (2) use the word association exercise so that students can learn a variety of ways to organize their thoughts; (3) "situate" learning in the students' cultures using their ideas or themes; and (4) collaborate with the students by guiding their research rather than directing it. (Fourteen references are included.) (PRA)

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Employing Freire's Notion of Dialogue as the "Sealing Power" in the Writing Classroom: Theoretical Base and a Call for Change

Students traditionally have viewed the teacher as one who has knowledge and will convey this knowledge to them in the course of the semester. Teachers, however, may think of themselves in different ways. Essentially, we can differentiate between two teaching orientations in terms of teacher control over classroom interaction as opposed to sharing this control with students. Jim Cummins, in the Feb. 1986 article "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Invention," calls the first the "transmission model," which propagates the teacher as the initiator and contoller of interaction. The teacher's task is to implement the knowledge she possesses to students who don't have this knowledge. Cummins differentiates between the transmission model of teaching, which focuses on "surface features of language or literacy such as handwriting, spelling, and decoding, and emphasizes correct recall of content taught by means of highly structured drills and workbook exercises" and the "reciprocal interaction model." This model stresses talking and writing as ways of learning and calls for oral and written dialogue between student and teacher, for guidance and facilitation (28). Cummins notes that the reciprocal interaction model "emphasizes the development of higher level cognitive skills rather than just factual recall, and meaningful language use by student rather than the

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correction of surface forms" (28).

The teacher's role in the composition classroom should be one of a generator of dialogic structure of class as she goes from one dialogic strategy to another. In order to accomplish a change in the present freshman composition curriculum, we must first examine some key theoretical concepts that will support these changes. For a theoretical basis I will focus on the notion that knowledge is a social act rather than individual (Bruffee, Geertz, LeFevre, Rorty) , and that dialogic method of teaching should take a more prominent place in composition classroom. Finally, this paper will attempt to classify different kinds of dialogic strategies that can be employed in the classroom and will show the value of each.

Teachers in traditional classrooms often face silent, alienated students with little and less creativity. The teacher's dominating and authoritarian role encourages student silence (Shor and Freire 117). Ira Shor argues that "students are not silent by nature" and that "they have a great deal to say, but not in the script of the traditional classroom" (117). We cannot start changing the students' attitudes about learning. As teachers, however, we should start reviewing our pedagogies and move away from the authoritarian role we project in our classrooms. Instead, we need to move in the direction of a dialogic classroom environment where we are re-learning the knowledge with our students because learning is a social act.

As a theoretical basis for this paper is Vygotsky's notion that learning is a social process where the individual moves from social speech to "inner speech"; thus it transforms from social first to individual later. Vygotsky believed the primary function of speech to be communication, i.e. a social interaction. Inevitably, thought is influenced by social speech.

Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" echoes Vygotsky's notion of inner speech. The multitude of voices reinforces the social activity in guiding an individual through a task. Bakhtin's theory of dialogue acknowledges that language creates reality, rather than just represent it, in a collaborative way instead of individual and private. For Bakhtin, "to be means to communicate" (Clark 9-10). Bakhtin emphasizes the need for dialogue and communication, and the inevitable array of beliefs and values each of us brings to communication. As a result, Bakhtin views language incapable of being entirely neutral. This viewpoint coincides with Freire's beliefs that education is not neutral. Instead, we bring to the class our backgrounds and values and beliefs, and we display and share these values and thoughts in the act of communication.

Although Vivian Zamel addresses ESL teachers in her essay "Thinking Beyond Imagination," we find the circumstances she is discussing very similar to the problems and constraints native speakers of English face in the act of composing. Zamel, too, draws on Freirean pedagogy and methodology. She makes a point regarding the teacher's role as the authority figure. She states that "teachers become authorities by virtue of their knowing these procedures and forms, and, as a result, they are the sole determiners of whether these have been applied correctly or not" (187). In Freirean terms, this pedagogical system is termed a "banking model of education" in which the teachers determine what information or knowledge needs to be passed on to the students and then retrieved from them by means of test or exams. Another metaphor he uses is the "nutritive" concept whereby the teacher has to enrich the students by feeding them with knowledge. The banking concept of education resists dialogue and treats students as objects or "empty vessels." It is

precisely this kind of classroom that decreases motivation and creativity, increases the possibility of writer's block, and ultimately alienates the student.

It is this "culture of silence" that Freire finds similar to the oppressed of the third world. He notes that "these silences are varieties of alienation produced by transfer-of-knowledge pedagogy in US schools and colleges" (Shor and Freire 122). In addition to the passive tolerance of domination in a classroom resulting in this "culture of silence," there is yet another side to it which is an "aggressive, negative resistance" to learning (123). Interestingly, Freire sees the reason for this in the dichotomy of two worlds in which our students find themselves: "words we read and the world we live in. . . . In such a dichotomy, the world of reading is only the world where we have experiences but do not read about those experiences" (Shor and Freire 135). Thus in school we learn the school-oriented words and not the real-life words. This dichotomy creates and imposes a kind of culture of silence which can be reunited by dialogical method of education. By employing dialogic interaction in the classroom, the teacher and students can transform the school words into the reality and experience of the outside world. This kind of interaction and unification, Freire believes, can help raise critical consciousness in the students (136). Both Shor and Freire feel that "dialogical education bridges the gap. It connects reading words with reading reality, so the two can speak to each other. It gives student reality a voice in school at last, changing the abstract intellectual idiom of the classroom" (135).

It is clear that dialogic method of teaching should be encouraged and should take a more prominent place in the composition classrooms. Kenneth

Bruffee's concept of collaborative learning is essential to writing classrooms. Bruffee draws on Vygotsky's view that knowledge, thought, and learning are social and collaborative acts. By writing we are using language that includes thought and action. In addition, by writing we are of course communicating the multitude of voices inside us.

Freire fully accepts and employs the dialogic classroom as the basis for the "problem-posing" method of education. This method of education is the alternative Freire proposes. It is based on dialogue and as a result it encourages critical thinking and interaction. It is important to note the significant role language plays in education in its relation with consciousness and politics of the world around us. Language is essential in "reading the world" and liberating the oppressed from the oppressors. In turn, Freire bases his pedagogy on dialogue as the "existential necessity." The word is the essence of dialogue as it contains two distinct dimensions, reflection and action (Freire). For Freire dialogue is the "sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study" (Shor and Freire 100). He strongly emphasizes the need for dialogue and breaking of silence.

Writing teachers should strive to engage the students in writing as a process and into the approach Freire calls a "pedagogy of knowing," "whereby," to quote Zamel, "teaching and learning begin with the forming of a thematic universe based on student's needs, problems and perceptions. This . . . is only possible when writing is viewed as a mode of inquiry and learning, and when students are recognized as participants in the process of knowledge-making" (Zamel 191). This calls for a dialogic method of teaching which Freire propagates. Zamel proposes "a writing course based on the premise

that behavioristic noncontextualized, prescriptive rules and directives

> are ineffective, that a curriculum dividing writing into its constituent skills and defining these in terms of sequences (first words, then sentences, then paragraphs, then essays, then the research paper) fails to take into account how writing (all language) is acquired. Instead we must take into consideration the student's own built-in syllabus and his or her own attempts at creating and negotiating meaning, which is exactly what language acquisition theorists consider essential for effective language teaching and learning." (190)

One dialogic strategy that would implement this type of course pedagogy would be to begin the course by asking the students to reveal their writing experiences, and the various problems or obstacles they encounter in their writing, as well as their ideas and attitudes toward writing. This procedure would initiate the investigation phase of Freire's 3 phase process of education where generative themes of the class are discovered and are able to be examined more closely. The teacher should also have her own experiences and fears to make the discussion of genuine dialogue. The purpose is to establish a dialogue with the students from the very beginning. This could be done orally in a class discussion, or the students could be asked to provide written responses. However, a class discussion seems to be a better option for students to voice their opinions and reactions to writing. The teacher can note students' opinions, fears, and reactions can be noted on the board. Next, during the second phase these generative themes need to be codified or grouped into meaningful units to be used for discussion starters for critical thinking. The students should prove helpful in grouping or codifying the generative themes into meaningful groups. This second phase will then lead to the final phase, what Freire terms problematization, where students will be encouraged to take action or envision strategies for changes. What is so ideal in this three-phase process is that the students not only take part in the discussion that concerns their needs, but more importantly, they are the

ones who voice their needs, expectations, and fears. As a class community, they can share their problems and can work together in solving them and acting upon them. Since the subject matter deals with their own needs they will be drawn to it. Thus, the initial, perhaps even uncritical, responses are gradually transformed into critical thinking with an authentic voice.

Similar to this dialogic strategy is the word-association exercise where students learn the variety of ways to organize thoughts. The topics focus on student concerns and issues in their environment. Students slowly start to realize the importance of explaining their thoughts in writing in order to be understood in the wider community. The teacher can then assign a generative theme that affects the students in various ways. As a result, their group discussions lead them to examine, critique, and write about their theme. They start looking outside of their own experiences for other new sources of knowledge. They become critically aware of how society affects their environment. At this stage various rhetorical forms may be introduced by using them as a means of thinking, exploring, and writing about different aspects of their theme. Finally, in the last phase, the students can use writing as a means of intervening in their own social environment; for instance, they may be encouraged to submit a letter or editorial to a local newspaper as Fiore and Elsasser suggest. This strategy emphasizes and employs dialogue in the Freirean sense, that is, regards it as indispensable for the act of cognition, invites students to be critical thinkers, and bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality.

The concept of a "situated study" is yet another way of promoting dialogic inquiry. Basically, teachers need to "situate" learning in the students' cultures, using their themes or ideas. The goal is to make

connection and integrate the students' background experience with concepts from academic subjects and methods. Shor points out that

> situated study presents subjective themes in their larger social context, to challenge the givens of our lives and the surrounding system dominating daily life. These limits or givens are re-perceived eventually as confining membranes around us, historical borders, politically constructed Great Walls, which we contact to discover vulnerable points for breaking through. Simply recognizing that we are surrounded by political membranes is an advance. Then, finding means to go beyond its limits is a social goal of the dialogue. (105)

Freire acknowledges that the teacher should implement dialogic pedagogy by beginning from the students' own understanding of their daily life experiences, and their description of these experiences. For Freire this means "starting from concreteness, from common sense, to reach a rigorous understanding of reality" (106). Thus, again dialogue between student and teacher is encouraged and strongly emphasized in the classroom as they build on personal experiences and draw connections to various subject matters. Using this dialogic strategy, the students are encouraged to think and draw these connections between their world and the real world outside.

Yet another dialogic strategy for teaching/learning is the collaborative nature of research. This dialogic strategy is based on the notion of writing conceived as social action. One could argue that all writing is collaborative. Using collaboration as a dialogic strategy can be beneficial for student writing. The teacher must first gain students' interest in a research project by challenging them with a topic or a book as a source for discussion and research which would involve them personally. In addition, the source or central topic must be challenging enough to require students to do a lot of background research reading before they can argue and

disagree or agree with the issue. To promote collaboration and true research on the students' part, the teacher's comments on student papers should address their ideas and ask questions or direct them to particular passages in the text. The teacher's role is still that of a controller of discussion, but great emphasis should be placed on the students' development of dialogue with the author on particular issues instead of finding the correct interpretation. The students thus become more responsible for finding and reading all the background information and material needed in order to fully comprehend the book. This strategy in turn not only leads to a dialogue and collaboration between student and teacher, but just as importantly, it leads and promotes dialogue and collaboration between the students as participants in the writing community. In her collaborative classroom, Marilyn Cooper organized the students to read and respond every week in a common disk file. This way the whole class could interact by writing and reading each other's comments as they made their way through the assigned text. Cooper feels that the most significant factor in making the course successful was abstaining from explaining ideas to the students, but encouraging them to explore on their own; by answering questions with questions; and doing a lot more listening than talking (Cooper 34). The students gradually begin looking among each other for support and answers: moreover, they soon realize that they are capable of valid and enriching ideas, thoughts, and contributions.

Cooper is showing us the stronger need for awareness of the social aspect of writing in the classroom, namely our relationship to our students and that of their purposes and experiences to the projects we assign to them (42). It is the teacher's task to show students that they do have knowledge, and that they feel at ease for relying on each other's contributions. This is

a similar belief that Paulo Freire also promotes. Such a concept of collaboration enables students to realize their own potential as thinking beings. In this example then, dialogic teaching/learning projects its social nature of which we must be more aware and employ for our advantage.

Finally, one can say that dialogue works and should work for both the student and the teacher rather than the student alone. In Freire's notion of a dialogic classroom, "everyone participates as colearners and coexplorers" (Shor 33). In other words, the teacher should not tell the students what she thinks is important to know and later after a series of lectures test this knowledge, but instead, the teacher should start the course aware that she knows a lot and leave the course "'relearned' because of the dialogue-inquiry and rediscovery of the material with the students" (Shor & Freire 101). As Freire states in his "Letter to North-American Teachers,"

> the teacher reexperiences his or her own capacity to know through the similar capacity to know that exists in the learners. To teach, then, is the form that knowing takes as the teacher searchers for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing. Thus, teaching is both creative and critical. It requires inventiveness and curiosity by both teacher and learner in the process. (Shor 213)

This approach sets up a vast difference between the traditional approach of the lecture and teacher as the authority figure (oppressor) who delivers his knowledge verbally to the students, who in turn absorb this knowledge and later reproduce it through tests, and the more innovative dialogical approach where re-learning is central to the role of the teacher. However, there are certain conditions for dialogue to take place. Dialogue implies, to quote Shor and Freire, "responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives. . . . Dialogue takes place inside some kind of program and context" . . . it "does not exist in a political vacuum" (102).

We must be reminded once again of Freire's definition of dialogue as "the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study" (Shor and Freire 100). In turn, the teacher is not the one who possesses all knowledge and delivers this mass of knowledge to the student who in turn absorbs the information and later is tested on it; rather, the teacher "re-learns the objects through studying them with the students" (Shor and Freire 101). Ira Shor clarifies the contrast between the two pedagogies. He says:

> Think of the difference between describing a course as an expert syllabus, a long reading list, a series of lectures from a professor, a succession of question periods, and a final exam to test the knowledge, compared to a course where the professor enters knowing a great deal but leaves the course 'relearned' because of the dialogue-inquiry, the rediscovery of the material with the students. (101)

This dialogic strategy of teacher re-learning the material with the students becomes a goal for every teacher to strive for. One could say that this kind of dialogic strategy becomes almost essential for entering into a true dialogue and the learning process.

Ann Berthoff in her book <u>The Sense of Learning</u>, uses a question as a title for part one. She asks "Is Learning Still Possible?" and on the following page answers, "Yes--if it is conceived as dialogic action in classrooms which are philosophic laboratories for the study of meaning" (9). It is clear that dialogue and dialogic interaction will enable learning and knowing to take place. Thus, the teacher's role becomes that of a generator of dialogic structure of class which will consequently enable both the student and the teacher to learn and relearn the material and promote critical awareness and action. We must realize that dialogic interaction is a natural process of learning and that there are numerous ways one can adapt it to fit the needs of her students. I end with Ann Berthoff's statement regarding

Freire's ideas:

> Paulo Freire's ideas are accessible and adaptable: if we can reconstitute our professional meetings as culture circles and our journals as authentic forums, we can begin to hear from one another about all attempts to develop a pedagogy of knowing. We will surely be engaged in forming the concept of literacy and thereby we will eventually change the state of affairs.

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